BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0560 APRIL 12, 1976
ANITA CHAPMAN

TAKE A LOOK AT A BOOK: NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK

ANNCR:

FOR THE PAST WEEK, AMERICANS HAVE TAKEN NOTE OF NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK, A TIME WHEN THEY ARE REMINDED OF THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE AT THE THIRTEEN THOUSAND PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE UNITED STATES. HERE WITH MORE ON THIS, VOA'S ANITA CHAPMAN:

VOICE:

THE LOCAL PUBLIC LIBRARY IS AS MUCH A PART OF AMERICAN LIFE AS THE LOCAL SUPERMARKET. BUT IN CONTRAST TO THE SUPERMARKET, THE LIBRARY IS FREE. ANYONE WHO CAN WRITE HIS NAME CAN BORROW BOOKS OR SPEND THE DAY BROWSING THROUGH REFERENCE VOLUMES OR CURRENT NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES THAT CAN'T BE TAKEN OUT.

FROM CHILDHOOD, AMERICANS ARE TAUGHT TO BE QUIET IN THE BOOK STACKS, SO THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IS OFTEN AN ISLAND OF TRANQUILITY IN THE NOISY VIGOR OF AMERICAN LIFE. INDEED FOR SOME, IT IS A HOME AWAY FROM HOME. THE GIFTED WRITER JAMES BALDWIN SHAPED HIS STYLE WHEN HE FLED THE STREETS OF HARLEM TO THE SOLACE OF THE LIBRARY SHELVES. PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE ROOTED IN THE AMERICAN CONVICTION THAT LEARNING MUST BE OPEN TO ALL, AND THAT FROM THE CLASH OF DIFFERING VIEWS SOME SPARK OF TRUTH WILL EMERGE. AS SOON AS THE REVOLUTION AGAINST ENGLAND WAS WELL SECURED, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND HIS FRIENDS OPENED A LIBRARY IN PHILADELPHIA. IT WAS SOON FOLLOWED BY THE PRESTIGIOUS ATHENAEUM IN BOSTON. THEY WERE PUBLIC ONLY IN THE SENSE ANYONE COULD SUBSCRIBE TO BELONG. THEY WERE WIDELY IMITATED.

THE FIRST TRULY PUBLIC LIBRARY WAS OPENED IN PETERBOROUGH, NEW HAMPSHIRE. ITS FUNDING CAME FROM TAXES, A PORTION OF WHICH COULD BY LAW BE SPENT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION. THAT'S STILL THE WAY THEY GET THEIR MAJOR FUNDING.

AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY A MULTI-MILLIONAIRE WHO LOVED PEACE, AND LINKED IT WITH EDUCATION, GAVE A CHUNK OF HIS FORTUNE TO BUILD LIBRARIES FOR THE PEOPLE. THE FIFTY-SIX MILLION DOLLARS OF ANDREW CARNEGIE GAVE TREMENDOUS IMPETUS TO THE SPREAD OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES. BY THE NINETEEN THIRTIES, EVEN RURAL AREAS WERE DOTTED WITH LIBARIES, AS GOOD ROADS, ACTIVE FEDERAL FUNDING, AND INVENTION OF THE AMBULANT BOOKMOBILE COMPLETED THE SYSTEM.

(OPT) BUT IN REALITY THERE IS NO SYSTEM. AMERICAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE FUNDED AND CONTROLLED FOR THE MOST PART ON THE COMMUNITY LEVEL, THOUGH ALL BELONG TO A NATIONAL ASSOCIATION THAT COORDINATES SUCH ACTIVITIES AS NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK, THAT EACH YEAR FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS HAS PUBLICIZED AND CELEBRATED THE PRINTED WORD. (END OPT) INFLATION HAS HIT LIBRARIES HARD. TO CONTROL THE STUPENDOUS COSTS INVOLVED IN STOCKING AND MAINTAINING PUBLIC LIBRARIES, MANY ARE NOW FORMING NETWORKS. SMALL LIBRARIES OF THE NETWORK HAVE ACCESS THROUGH TELEX TO THE SPECIALIZED MATERIAL OF LARGER LIBRARIES.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES HAVE GONE FAR BEYOND THE MERE COLLECTING OF BOOKS. THEY ARE ALSO AUDIO-VISUAL CENTERS,

WHERE ONE CAN BORROW FILMS, CLASSICAL AND FOLK MUSIC, SLIDES, RECORDS OF POETRY AND DRAMA. THEY ARE ALSO COMMUNITY CENTERS, WHERE AFTER SCHOOL CHILDREN CAN COME FOR STORY-TELLING, GROWN-UPS CAN HOLD COMMUNITY MEETINGS, AND GROUPS OF CITIZENS CAN STAGE PROGRAMS OF THEIR LIKING. AND FOR MILLIONS OF STUDENTS -- AND AMERICANS WHO DO CROSSWORD PUZZLES -- THERE IS AN INFORMATION SERVICE THAT IN LARGER CITIES IS OPEN NIGHT AND DAY TO LOOK UP ANSWERS TO THEIR INQUIRIES.

AND IT'S ALL FREE. SO IN HONOR OF NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK, LET'S SAY BRAVO FOR A JOB WELL DONE.

JS/PBM